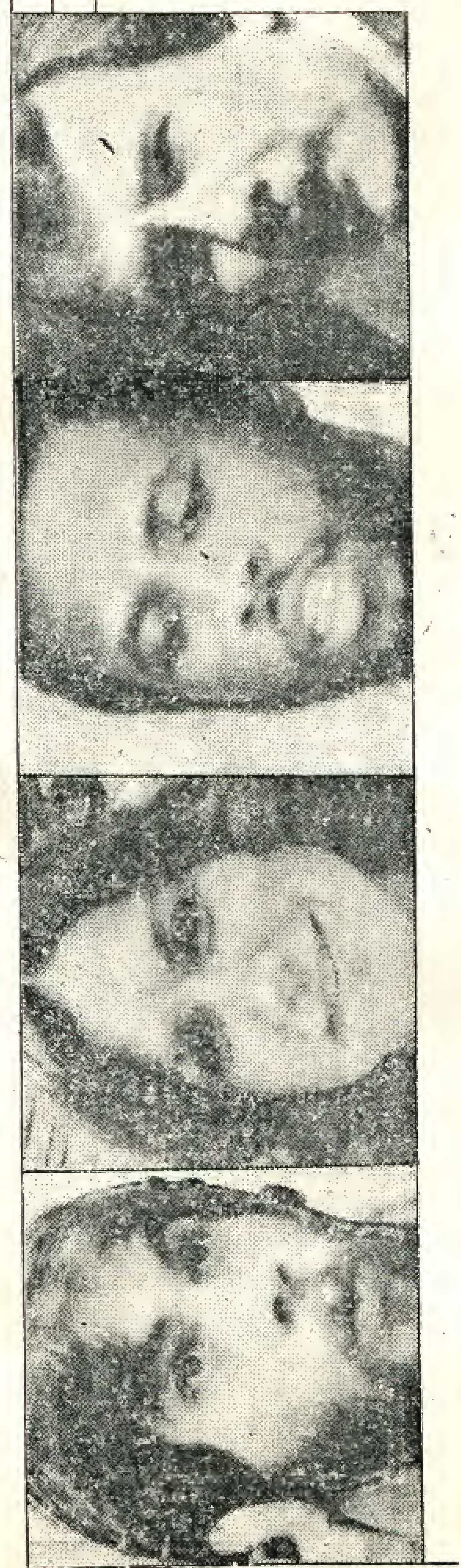


EXTRA

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Text by Don Boxmeyer, Staff Writer



Gonna Fly Now

What do Greg Barron, Mary Ann Buelow, W. Rayford Johnson and Don James have in common? They're creative, dedicated professionals. They work hard and for the most part it's paid off; you'll be hearing more from them because, as the song says, they're gonna fly now...

Layout / Illustration

(over)

***'I knew exactly what I wanted to do,
how it had to be done.'***



KSJN-FM in St. Paul, says Greg Barron,
"is about the right size pond for me." — Staff Photo by Bill Davis

As Greg Barron sees it, most radio journalists stuff information into their programs as though they were filling cargo trucks.

"They haul out a lot of information in those trucks, but they aren't very beautiful things to behold," said Barron, award-winning reporter-producer for Minnesota Public Radio station KSJN-FM in St. Paul. "I hope my programs are sports cars. They don't carry a lot of information, but they carry it in style."

Barron's fondness for traveling light has paid off. At 31, he's already won 20 major news awards for his documentaries on such things as the Mexican-American community in St. Paul, burial rituals, the life of policemen and Minnesota's powerline dispute. And this spring, Barron won the highest honor and the most coveted award available to broadcasters — the George Foster Peabody award, the Pulitzer Prize of electronic journalism.

He won it with his portrait of the American prairie in "The Prairie Was Quiet," a 56-minute excursion in sound that took Barron and his technical director, David Carlton Felland, 14 months to produce.

A native of the West Coast who was attracted to Minnesota Public Radio in 1972, Barron became fascinated with the prairie of southwestern Minnesota. His plans for the documentary crystallized last spring after he met Peter Lehenhard Braun, a German radio producer who has pioneered in the combination of documentary journalism and the use of sound as an art medium.

"Braun's style takes advantage of the fact that a lot of people have very sophisticated stereo receivers in their homes. I thought Aha! It's about time we put the listener right out on that prairie."

"When the idea came to me, I knew exactly what I wanted to do and how it had to be done," Barron said. "I couldn't tell you all the details, but I could have told you it was going to be great. I knew it. I just knew it."

Barron's bosses unhesitatingly gave him the green light for the project. Sally Pope, vice president for community affairs at KSJN, said, "There's absolutely no reluctance about going along with Greg's ideas. He long ago earned his stripes here and has every right to expect

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Greg Barron

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that he will get a yes answer. We try to provide a very supportive environment for him to be creative in."

Barron and Felland spent weeks out in the field, some of the time crawling around in the tall grass in the middle of the night trying to record the sound of crickets.

"What we were going for was this extraordinarily high quality sound," said Barron. "It seems incredible, but there is almost no place you can go where you don't pick up the sounds of civilization. Even out on the prairie, there's the sound of an airplane or a train or a truck or a farmer starting up his tractor two miles away. Sometimes we had to record for hours to get just a few minutes we needed."

The program, aired last November, includes a script, by Barron, over the rising and fading sounds in the background of John Deere tractors, herds of trampling buffalo, plow horses, booming prairie chickens, and birds ranging from yellow-headed crows to marbled godwits.

"The most dominant feature of the prairie is the wind," he said. "It's going constantly and even the most sophisticated microphones are terribly sensitive to wind. They just rattle in the wind. And we never did capture the wind sound; we called recording experts all over the country, and we wound up using a lab in Minneapolis that synthesized the wind electronically."

But Barron's lyric script, as well as brilliant use of sound, demonstrates his creativity as a writer:

"The prairie chicken once numbered in the millions, and that was their fall. Firing once across his corner, a farmer in 1870 could kill enough to provide a meal for a family of eight. In North Dakota, they were shot from the back of wagons. They were shot by the thousands and shipped to St. Louis for hog feed."

"I suspect the feeling that I have when producing a documentary," Barron said, "is much the same as that of a woman carrying a child. I have this feeling that I am creating something very good, but there is always the fear that the child will not be extraordinary, not up to my expectations. What if it is a dim child, or even average?"

Barron is still a little baffled but flattered by the attention he has received since winning the Peabody. He has, he said, turned down all offers to leave KSJN.

"This is the flagship of public radio in the country today," he said. "And I love Minnesota. It's my home now. This is about my size pond. I've done my best here, and it's come back to the station and they return it to me. I like it here."

What's next?

"I'm not working on a thing right now. I won't produce a documentary until I have an idea, the inspiration to go out and do something."

He looks at the impressive, framed Peabody that is the pride of Minnesota Public Radio, and the young journalist sighs.

"I don't know what in the world I can do to top this, though."